Church unity

The Historical Significance of Denominationalism

BY
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A PAPER

Read before the Conference on Organic Union
Held at the Invitation of the General
Assembly of the Presbyterian
Church in the U. S. A.

Witherspoon Building, Philadelphia, Pa.
December 4-5, 1918

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FOREWORD

The address of Prof. George W. Richards, D.D., on The Historical Significance of Denominationalism was given during the second session of the Conference on Organic Union.

It was the only paper on the Program dealing with the general subject of Organic Union of the Churches; the other addresses and papers presented the viewpoints of the several churches or denominations.

There was a widespread desire expressed for its publication in pamphlet form with a view to its largest possible circulation and, by vote of the Conference, the Committee on the Proceedings was authorized to publish Dr. Richards's paper in pamphlet form. Friends of the

cause are kindly requested to aid in the circulation of this notable address.

Copies of this address can be had at 10 cents each, postpaid, and at the rate of $5.00 per 100.

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The Historical Significance of Denominationalism

We shall be able to estimate aright the relative value of the present order in church and state and forecast the trend of its future development in the light of its origin and growth. The historical background of the modern age is medieval Europe, whose political and ecclesiastical ideal was a world-wide empire with a uniform government and religion for all the nations of the earth. In this scheme of cosmopolitanism there was no place for nationalism or denominationalism. It was a revival of the Roman Empire supported by divine sanctions and clad in ecclesiastical robes. The two terms, descriptive of the aim and scope of

pagan Rome, were appropriated by Christian Rome; namely, universality and eternity. The authority for such dominion was not based upon the consent of the governed, but upon divine right re-enforced by human might. The purpose of empire was to realize in visible form through the vicegerents of heaven, emperor and pope, the kingdom of God upon earth. Hence the name, Holy Roman Empire. Every phase of human life, politics, religion, morals, art, philosophy, the individual and the group, was regulated by God through His anointed.

Uniformity of religious belief and practice, in this plan of empire, was more than a distant vision. It became an actual fact in medieval catholicism. The Latin language was in common use in worship and in literature. The same holy offices were performed at every shrine from Bergen to Palermo, from Koenigsberg to Madrid. Priests and monks were equally at home in every land from the North Sea to the Mediterranean. Scholars wandered from Bologna to Oxford, from Paris to Salamanca, and heard in different universities from

men of different race the same ideas in the same tongue. In the service of the church and in ecclesiastical preferment, men were not hedged in by national boundaries or traditions. Gerbert, a Frenchman, became archbishop of Ravenna in Italy; Lanfranc, an Italian, became archbishop of Canterbury in England; the German Norbert established a new order of canons in France. Men of many nations united in the armies of the crusaders. The hope of a respublica christiana, the kingdom of God on earth ruled by pope and emperor in the name of Jesus Christ, was at the point of fulfillment when new forces came into control which wrought decay and dissolution.

Universal empire never fails to kindle the imagination and to cast a spell over the human spirit. Notwithstanding its repeated failures, in ancient and medieval times, it has been revived in so widely different forms as the humanitarianism of Comte, the socialism of Marx, and the militarism of the Hohenzollerns. The periodic revival of the dream of universalism in government and in religion, in spite of its failures, indicates a reason for it in the nature

of things. It is an earnest, though misguided, attempt to put in corporate form the innate sense of the unity of God and of humanity, the irrepressible feeling that there is

"One God, one law, one element,
And one far-off divine event,
To which the whole creation moves."

However sincere the attempt at uniformity of civil and religious institutions, it will always fail because it disregards the claims of individualism and of nationalism, which are as deeply rooted in human nature as the aspirations to universalism. A uniform cosmopolitanism fails to develop the infinite variety of mental, moral, religious, political and aesthetic life which lies dormant in tribes and nations. The individual, the particular, the specific, with its priceless value, fascinating beauty and absorbing interest, is suppressed for the maintenance of a colorless and dull uniformity. No room is left for self-expression and self-realization in individual and national life, for which men have always become heroes and martyrs. The experience of history assures us that an ideal

born of fancy without basis in fact is unreal and impracticable; and efforts to enforce it in life must end in obscuration, distortion and compromise. This was the outcome of the Holy Roman Empire, too holy to be Roman and too Roman to be holy. The compact between pope and emperor, vicars of Christ on earth, turned into bitter rivalry and deadly warfare, with victory alternating between papal tyranny and imperial despotism. What in theory was a divine order of life became in practice a regime of inhumanity verging on brutality.

With the dissolution of medieval uniformity came modern diversity—nationalism in the state, denominationalism in the church, twins born of the same parentage. The transition from the one to the other was made in two historic movements: the Renaissance, the rediscovery of man, and the Reformation, the rediscovery of God. From the one came humanism and from the other evangelicalism, the direct opposites of the two controlling ideals of medieval life, universal dominion by the group and renunciation of the world by the individual.

Renaissance and Reformation were all the more irresistible on account of the long-felt inadequacy of the Catholic conception of life to satisfy the human heart. It proved, after centuries of experiment, a "bed shorter than that a man can stretch himself on it; and the covering narrower than that he can wrap himself in it." It satisfied neither the progressive men of the 15th and 16th centuries nor the requirements of the New Testament. Its defect was the fatal disease of one-sidedness, the one-sided emphasis of the divine to the neglect of the human, of the institution to the neglect of the individual, of authority to the neglect of freedom. Men were the wards of the church and the subjects of the state. Thought and action were prescribed for them. But when the individual awoke to his personal rights and affirmed his ability to know and to do, he could no longer be curbed by prince or prelate.

We shall briefly enumerate the positive forces favoring a new era. The Teutonic tribes gradually became mature nations, each striving for a political and religious order which was not simply its heritage but its creation.

Greco-Roman culture, preserved in the Catholic Church, stood for authority and obedience, the exaltation of the institution and the repression of the individual. The Teutonic spirit aspired to freedom and self-realization, the right of reason and of conscience. Teutonism and Catholicism could not permanently dwell under the same roof.

The new nations were stimulated to revolt, also, by the revival of the ancient classics. The writings of Greece and Rome expressed in crystal phrase the spirit that throbbed in Celt and Saxon. What the Greeks once did, the Teutons now desired to do.

The rediscovery of the New Testament and the reexperience of saving faith, sovereign grace, and the priesthood and brotherhood of believers, had in them the dynamic of a new age—an age in which nationalism took the place of cosmopolitanism and denominationalism of Catholicism, the one largely controlled by humanism, the other, relatively at least, by evangelicalism. Both were the result of individualism and personal freedom put in place

of institutionalism and imperial authority. Individualism in its reaction against vested authority was held in check in the formation of new states by racial affinities and national traditions. But in the church it ran riot; not content with the state church, men organized dissenting groups within the state and regardless of the state.

The new age bred its own brood of troubles. Its gains were not without losses or its virtues without vices. Time came when the ills of nationalism and denominationalism were only little less intolerable than the evils of imperialism and papacy.

Each state became a miniature empire, repudiating the age-long right of the conscience of united Christendom to impose restraints upon its will. Each state refused to recognize a law or court of final appeal, beyond itself, for the adjudication of international difficulties. The original autocracy of the middle age was broken into fragments, but each fragment became an original autocracy as tyrannical as medieval sovereigns. The outcome was in-

terminable war between the nations until Western civilization was on the verge of bankruptcy. Poets and philosophers sang and spoke of a return of the "good old middle age," the abolition of nation and sect by the revival of an imperialism and a catholicity of the medieval kind.

New problems, however, cannot be solved by the easy way of the resuscitation of old institutions. The days of civil and religious uniformity, enforced by might, were forever gone. If the essential unity of civilization was to find political expression, it could not be done through the exaltation of a dominating person or race becoming the conscience of mankind and the arbiter of its destiny. Nor could the dearly bought rights of individuals and states ever again be ignored in a new order. Remedy for the cure of political ills must be found in a form of internationalism, differing widely from the homogeneous cosmopolitanism of ancient or medieval times.

Its prophet was Hugo Grotius, who proclaimed a law higher than the national will and binding on all nations, Christian or Pagan.

He appealed to the law of nature of which Sophocles sings in his Antigone: "Laws that are not of today or yesterday, but abide forever and of their creation knoweth no man." The Peace Palace of The Hague is the temple dedicated to this cause. The League of Nations to Enforce Peace is a recent organization for its effective realization. A world divided into two armies for more than four years has declared, by a colossal holocaust of men and treasure, that a universal empire, trampling upon the rights of nations and seeking uniformity by the stifling of nationalism, is both a base and a baseless dream, and that a democratic internationalism respecting national rights as inviolate and making room for infinite diversity in the co-operative unity of the race is the goal of evolving humanity.

The churches of the modern age shared the spirit and the fate of the states. They were divided into sects and schisms, each opposed to the other and none recognizing a common law of faith or life binding on all. Each was sufficient unto itself and was the arbiter of its controversies. True, all appealed to the Bible,

but the Bible had as many different meanings as interpreters. Conflicts between churches were fought out, though never decided, with bitter polemics by ecclesiastical assemblies and by ministers of the gospel. Enemies were met and disposed of by ways foul or fair. The strong had no compunctions about suppressing the weak, if need be, by force. Denominations, like nations, grew in strength by invading one another's domain. The one proselyted, the other conquered. Lord Acton says: "Calvin preached and Bellarmine lectured, but Machiavelli ruled."

For the diversity and freedom of Protestantism men paid the price of sectarian warfare, Catholic against Evangelical, Lutheran against Calvinist, Anglican against Puritan, conformist against dissenter. For deliverance from paralyzing Catholic uniformity, men paid the price of collective action, co-operation and united effort for the kingdom of God. For freedom from external authority, from the grip of the dead hand, men paid the price of the excesses and follies of private judgment running into autocratic individualism or anarchy.

Penance and asceticism were abolished, but in many instances without their evangelical equivalent in Protestant circles.

Notwithstanding the loss incurred in going from medieval catholicity to modern denominationalism, we believe the gain was greater than the loss and that humanity and religion took a long stride forward through the Reformation and the Renaissance.

But from the beginning the nobler spirits of the age deplored sect and schism in the church as both unprofitable and unchristian. They took steps to retrieve the loss incurred through divisions. The hope of a reunited Protestantism, yea of a reunited Christianity, never died out in Melancthon and Calvin, Bucer and Cranmer, Duraeus and Calixtus, Zinzendorf and Wesley. They in their sphere, like Grotius in his, caught a glimpse of a unity of the churches deeper than their diversity, of the essentials of Christianity in distinction from its doctrinal and institutional forms, of a law higher than the will of denominational judicatories, of a kingdom wider than any church or

than all churches. In the light of this vision the spirit of polemics waned and the spirit of irenics grew. Men felt that they might differ in doctrine and yet co-operate for the moral and social betterment of nations. While they differed in creeds, their hymns and prayers were one. It was but natural that men would propose plans to give tangible and organized form to the growing consciousness of Christian unity. There were those in the churches, as there were in the states, who attempted to heal divisions by the restoration of Catholicism, medieval or ancient. But just as the ills of nationalism cannot be cured by a return to cosmopolitanism, so the defects of denominationalism cannot be remedied by a restoration of Catholicism. Nothing but a new interdenominationalism, akin to the new internationalism, recognizing both the unity of the spirit of Christianity and the diversity of its forms, conserving the freedom and personal initiative which go with individualism and denominationalism, and yet engendering co-operation in place of competition between the churches and the subordination of denominational welfare

to the advancement of the Kingdom of Christ upon earth—this alone will satisfy the demands of the Christian consciousness today.

Various forms of closer relation between the churches have been tried, including the Evangelical Alliance, the council of churches of the same type, as, for example, The Council of Reformed Churches holding the Presbyterian System throughout the World, and the Federal Council of the Churches of Christ in America. Yet none of these is final. There is an irrepressible longing for a still closer union expressed in the proposal for an Ecumenical Conference on Faith and Order, and in the unanimous action of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in the U. S. A. inviting the evangelical churches of the U. S. to a conference on organic union, in response to which we are here today. While statesmen on two continents are devising a new internationalism, churchmen are true to the spirit of the age and of their Lord when they assemble to consider ways of a new interdenominationalism. For a new relation between nations will inevitably require, in time, a new relation be-

tween the churches. Again the two will be twin-born.

The problem before us is how shall the evangelical denominations of America approach the question of organic union? Not by reversion to the doctrines, polity or cultus of any one of them. Such a plan would provoke the suspicion of an unholy and unwarranted presumption. Not even by the proposal of a form of faith and order, old or new, as a basis for the union of all churches. Such a proposal would be neither biological nor christological. Organic union is unthinkable save as it comes by organic process and not by legislative action. A new organism must evolve, taking into itself the essential Christian elements of the old denominations and eliminating their ephemeral historical forms. Such an evolution requires a new organic principle laying hold of the stuff of the several denominational organisms and uniting them, by transforming them after its own kind into a new organism, greater than any one of them or than all of them.

This organic principle, we believe, is the essence of evangelical Christianity, not, of

course, a dogma, a polity, a cultus, or a moral code. It is a spiritual experience born out of a sense of need—the need of the living God. Not indeed a new need, but an old need felt in a new way in the dawn of a new age. It was felt by prophet and psalmist, by apostle and father, by schoolman and reformer. Each answered it in his own way and in the light of his own day. Whenever a new vision of God satisfies the cry of the awakened heart there is a marked advance in the history of Christianity and in the religious life of the race.

As in the dawn of a new era in the 16th century, so in the dawn of a new age in the 20th, the elemental spiritual needs of men voice themselves in a threefold form; the need of providence, the need of grace, and the need of truth or a way of life.

In the presence of a universe with forces that devastate and destroy and of the evils of the individual and social life, some in the blood, some in the air, God needs to be justified before men as much as men need to be justified before God. The one is the perennial problem

of theodicy, the other of soteriology. The Reformers found a solution, not in ancient philosophy, in stoical defiance, in cynical scorn, in epicurean indulgence, or in sceptical negation, but in childlike trust in a Christ-like God who upholds and controls matter and mind in the universe for the ultimate establishment of the reign of holy love. God is justified before men by faith in divine providence.

Men, then as now, came to a new sense of sin and failure, and felt the need of grace the more keenly they felt the guilt of sin. The Reformers were humiliated by personal sin; we, in addition, are burdened by sin in its overpowering social and national form. In vain do we seek riddance of sin by the outworn devices of men, by ignoring it, by doing penance for it, by forgetting it. Like the Reformers, we can find peace only through forgiveness, in the free grace of God revealed in Christ and appropriated by faith. Men are justified by faith in a Christ-like God.

Men, then as now, felt the need, not only of divine grace for the sinner, but of a divine life

for the saved. In vain did they follow the traditions of the church, the example of prophets and priests, of sages and saints, or of the light of reason and the promptings of conscience. These were mostly blind guides leading the blind. They found the Lord and Master, as well as the Saviour, in the God-like man who said: "I am the way, the truth and the life."

The essence of evangelical Christianity, therefore, is a spiritual experience of God in Christ who satisfies the permanent threefold need of the human soul by revealing a God of love who provides, a God of grace who forgives, and a God of truth who guides. When men once have found Christ and direct access to God, they can no longer be humanist or Catholic; not even Episcopalian or Baptist, Reformed or Presbyterian, Congregational or Methodist, Disciple or Quaker, Lutheran or Calvinist. They can be only evangelical Christians.

Denominational names represent groups who, with more or less success, have attempted to embody the evangelical spirit in intellectual

and institutional forms. Each of them has only relatively succeeded and so far each has relatively failed.

When we have a deeper and broader experience of the changeless evangelical realities our ecclesiastical forms and formulas will become inadequate and irksome, and we shall be prepared to lay them aside as garments that are worn out. We shall cease to pronounce denominational shibboleths, and in the irresistible power of a new life born of the Holy Spirit we shall proclaim, with heart and voice and hand, the evangel of Christ.

When we are thus united by the spirit of God in hope, and faith, and love, then, with full confidence in one another and with supreme loyalty to the Christ in us, we shall declare ourselves before the world what we are in fact, the united Church of Christ. Then the Lord's prayer for the unity of the believers will be answered, "that they all may be one; as thou, Father, art in me and I in thee, that they also may be one in us."

After a spiritual unity of this kind is once begotten in us then we shall take our time, as

did the fathers in ancient councils and modern assemblies, to work out a formula of doctrine, a system of government, a mode of worship, and a way of life, which will be true to the Christ of the New Testament, to the Christ in us, and to the democratic spirit of the age. In the meantime let us work and pray with the spirit of the prophets, with the patience of the saints, and with the courage of our Lord.